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Auschwitz Stories from the Death Camp

In the spring of 1944, as the war turned against the Germans, trains bearing the first of Hungary's Jews began arriving at Birkenau;. Until then, Hungary's 800,000 Jews, although oppressed, had been spared the worst of the Nazi terrors, and it is likely that none of them had even heard the word Auschwitz. On one of these trains rode my sister, 32 year-old Manyi with her two children, eight-year-old Georg and five-year-old Susan. Eighty people stood together in boxcars for four sweltering days and nights. There was a bucket to drink from and another that served as a toilet.

I was unaware that I was in the next box car to my sister. The train arrived at Auschwitz late at night and was parked there until dawn, when the door was flung open and the dazed passengers formed into lines for a selection. I saw my sister with her two children getting off the train. I immediately went over to them, hugged them and kissed them. I promised my sister that I was going to help her with the children. I was holding little Susan's hand. Five by five we were marching past Mengele himself -- as beautiful as a statue with his glistening boots and crisp black SS uniform. Old people, sick people, young children and their mothers went to the left. We all went left. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Mengele. "How old are you?" he said. I told the truth. I had the little girl by the hand. "Is she your child?" "No, I want to help my sister". He shoved the little girl away. She fell down. I was thrown to the right. And that's how I didn't go to the crematorium.

Auschwitz was the largest of several Nazi extermination camps. The gas chambers were located in neighboring Birkenau. I never saw my sister nor her children again. To this day I have kept them alive in my mind. And it hurts very much. We had to leave all our belongings in the box cars. Some prisoners tried to tell the mothers of the young children to give the children to the older relatives. They couldn't do it.

I was with some other women selected to work. We were stripped, disinfected, our hair shorn, tattooed with a number on the forearm, issued a sack uniform, a bowl and a spoon, and turned into our barracks.

Every morning and every evening we had to be counted. It took about two hours. It was called Appel. In the middle of this insanity, I got my period. What could I do? I was not prepared for it. I tried to talk to a motherly type of woman and asked her to help me. German was the language that everybody understood. Later I learned that they put some drugs in our daily soup, so we shouldn't get a period.

I heard that some Polish prisoners there were very resourceful and were able to get warmer clothing and also extra rations, which we could sometimes get from them. They were working in nearby Birkenau. My elementary schooling was in Slovakia, and Slovak resembles the Polish language. I learned to speak Polish without an accent and became accepted by their group.

Our daily routine consisted of: getting up in the dark, standing Appel for two hours to be counted. Sometimes there wasn't any work. We ended up carrying huge pieces of rocks up the hill and down the hill all day long. At dusk we were ready to be counted again. We had ersatz coffee and a small piece of bread. Evening time a tasteless soup and a smaller piece of bread. A lot of women in our barracks couldn't take it very long, they stepped over to the gas chamber line and committed suicide. There were not many glamorous jobs available.

Some women worked near the Sonder Commando prisoners who worked at the gas chamber. They were told that the building was a big shower room. The people were all naked waiting for the water to come, but instead came cyanide gas. Some people screamed, one group sang the Czech national anthem and some prayed. Then the prisoners hauled away the bodies to the crematoriums. Those were the wide buildings with the tall chimneys. They were burning day and night. The smell was unbelievable. Still more and more boxcars were unloading human cargo. It was a terrible existence in that atmosphere. It took a strong constitution to withstand it. I never knew a place like that could exist.

There were rumors that the Russian Army was close by. It was January 1945. The Nazis wouldn't let us be liberated, so the commanders of the camp decided to evacuate the whole camp, by going on a forced march to an unknown destination through the icy Polish winter. This was later called "the death march". I was one of the lucky ones. I had good leather boots and a warm sweater. I was praying for strength and courage to withstand the cold Polish winter, especially when I saw a weak

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woman who couldn't keep up the pace pushed by a rifle into a ditch and shot. I said to myself that this will never happen to me. After three days of marching, we found a rail car with black coal. Some of us fitted in. A layer of coal dust covered us so that sisters couldn't recognize each other. We went through many concentrations camps, but they didn't have room for us. Our last stop was the city of Hanover. In a small railroad car, a hundred people were without water, without air, without food. I felt sorry for the older people and felt something should be done. The guard came in and I tried to tell him the miserable condition we were in. We didn't even have air! He was a real Nazi. He said to me, "You want to start panic on this train? As soon as we stop in Hanover you'll be shot like a dog!"

After almost 10 days, my clothes were like rags, black coal dust still covering my face. I didn't have any chance. I was praying the maybe the guard forgot about me. The train stopped, he hauled me out and said, "She tried to make panic on the train". The Lieutenant looked at me, I saw his compassion. He said to the guard, "Look at her, she's gone through the mill, let her go." We embarked from the train and found ourselves in Bergen Belson, one of the infamous concentration camps. There they killed with typhoid fever.

Months later, after we had been liberated by British troops and I had been taken by the Swedish Red Cross to recuperate in Sweden, I found a magazine with the description of the liberation of Auschwitz by Russian troops. Lt. General Vasily Petrenko was a hardened veteran of some of the worst fighting of the war. "I was unprepared for Auschwitz" he said. What astonished him especially were the children. They were the survivors of the medical experiments perpetrated by the Auschwitz camp doctor Josef Mengele. But Auschwitz was something new on the earth. Its elaborate mechanisms for transporting, selecting, murdering and incinerating thousands of people a day constituted a kind of industrialization of death. On that day, the 20th Century saw itself in the mirror and turned away in horror.